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*Magic Flutes & Enchanted Forests: The Supernatural in
Eighteenth-Century Musical Theater* (review)

Leonardo J. Waisman

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EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AND BEYOND

Magic Flutes & Enchanted Forests: The Supernatural in Eighteenth-Century Musical Theater. By David J. Buch. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. [xxvii, 450 p. ISBN 9780226078090. \$50.] Music examples, illustrations, appendices, bibliography, index.

“Magic-heroic-amatory, with a touch of the tragic” (*di stile magico-eroico-amoroso, toccante il tragico*): Antonio Salieri’s choice of terms to describe his own opera, *Armida*, reveals the complexity of eighteenth-century style and genre definitions (later in the same phrase the composer equates “style” and “genre”). It is much to David Buch’s credit that he has undertaken, with a large measure of success, to unravel one of the threads that make up this tangled web.

Although the book resulted from Buch’s interest in Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*, it is by no means the story of Mozart’s precursors, culminating in a glowing account of how the genius from Salzburg outdid them all. Although Mozart gets a chapter of his own, Buch’s writing never suggests that he represents the ideal towards which previous composers were groping. Interestingly enough, the high points of the volume occur in the fairly slim preface and three-page postscript. These two constitute a conceptual frame enclosing the 358 pages devoted to substantiating the strong hypothesis made at the beginning, and providing the basis for the even stronger corollary that the writer springs at the reader in the last paragraphs. Buch postulates the continued existence, coherence and temporal development of a cluster of themes revolving around the idea of “the marvelous” that constitute “a forgotten chapter in the history of music” (p. x), to which “not a single book has been devoted” (p. xvi). Although, by and large, Buch is correct about the pointed ignorance of his subject in the scholarly literature—inadequately replaced, for example, by *Sturm und Drang* in Ratner’s list of topics (Leonard Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form and Style* [New York: Schirmer Books, 1980], 21)—he inexplicably neglects Reinhold Hammerstein’s substantial study, *Die Stimme aus der anderen Welt: Die Darstellung des Numinosen in der Oper von Monteverdi bis Mozart* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1998). He attributes much of the responsibility for musicology’s silencing of the magical genre to the “unques-

tioning acceptance” of the eighteenth-century *philosophes’* determined opposition. Buch has found that, notwithstanding these thinkers’ rationalistic strictures, the marvelous and the supernatural enjoyed great popularity on the eighteenth-century stage. In different genres and occasions it could either buttress the social status quo (when used by characters in authority) or function as allegorical social critique (when it was the powerless who wielded the magic wand).

The bulk of the book is devoted to following up the manifestations of the marvelous in operatic libretti and ballet plots of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, identifying in their musical settings a specific musical grammar and vocabulary. The area covered includes German-speaking lands, France, and Italy (this last, alas, more selectively). Casual references are also made to England; as usual, Spain is ignored, in spite of its strong theatrical tradition. One cannot complain, however, about such limitations: the amount of material that Buch has examined and organized is absolutely staggering.

An introductory chapter, “Precedents and Sources of Magic and the ‘Marvelous,’ ” presents the main classical and Renaissance sources, mainly mythology and epic romances, before sketching the main lines of seventeenth-century literary and musical handling of the fantastic. Perrault’s fairy tales, Italian *commedia dell’arte*, court and public opera, court ballet and *tragédie lyrique* are the main lodes where Buch mines for magic and the supernatural. A central concept here is that “music in and of itself connoted a magical presence by virtue of its inherent allegorical nature” (p. 23); therefore no special style or vocabulary is needed to represent the marvelous. In apparent contradiction to this statement, the author lists several specific devices, some of them employed all over Europe, others more characteristic of Italian and French genres: especially elegant instrumental music, the use of trombones or

flutes, special tonal areas such as C minor, unusual modal changes, descending octave leaps in the voice, rapid scales and repeated notes in the strings, accompanied recitative, and low-pitched string accompaniments are some of the basic items developed before 1700 to express the marvelous.

As it turns out, not many other musical signs were added to this stockpile in the next hundred years, covered in the following five chapters. Buch assigns exceptional importance to the musical theater and ballets produced by the Académie royale de musique. It is there, around 1750, that he places the most momentous development in the history of the marvelous: the definitive breaking up of the older association between music and the supernatural that fostered the expansion and codification of a dedicated musical language. The large instrumental, choral, and vocal forces employed, and the creation of scene complexes, were operative in enriching this tradition. Chapter 3 reviews the French comic genres. The element of parody seems to be one of the main contributions made by the writers and musicians of the fair theaters, the *Théâtre italien*, and the puppet shows. The emergence of the aristocratic fairy story, which Buch differentiates from the older fairy tale, and the rise of the Gothic in the final decades of the century are also credited with further inputs to the repertory.

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with Italian opera, *seria* and *buffa*. Conventional music-historical wisdom has it that the Arcadian reformers succeeded in banishing the fantastic and the supernatural from serious opera. Buch acknowledges the decreased incidence of magic in the genre, but explains that storms, battles and sacrifice scenes were effective substitutes, inviting similar musical responses; festive genres (*feste teatrali*, pastorals, ballets) were not affected by the new austerity; and imaginary ghosts and fake magic were set to the same kind of music as their "real" counterparts. He deals rather briefly with the Italian late-baroque composers, concentrating instead on Handel before arriving at the nodal point in this part of his narrative: the Franco-Italian synthesis launched around midcentury, which included, as a major departure, the emphasis on terrifying events: tempests, furies, infernal scenes. Blasts of the brass are added to the already familiar

arsenal for musical depictions of this *terribilità*, which the author links to the emerging aesthetic concept of the sublime.

More than half of the chapter on German musical theater is given over to fairy-tale operas, with a substantial section on *Der Stein der Weisen* (Vienna, 1790), the collective piece which includes some contributions by Mozart, as Buch himself revealed some years ago. Two of the traits most emphasized for the genre are the hegemonic influence of *opéra comique* and the "romantic" style, consisting of text settings with few repetitions. The author's interpretations of *Don Giovanni* and *Die Zauberflöte* are informed by his preceding survey of topics and genres, although not limited by it. They represent a fresh but not heterodox view of the two masterworks against the background of the large canvas painstakingly designed and filled out in the previous chapters.

In the hyperconcentrated postscript, a portentous derivation is postulated: in taking up the practice of representing the transcendental, "the composer took on the attributes of the magus, casting sonic spells," and eventually "assumed the creative force associated with the divine" (p. 359). The tradition of the *terribile*, developed for the representation of the marvelous, could end up supplying not only the techniques (Buch includes Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven as beneficiaries) but also the romantic construction of the composer as a demiurge. Or, from a different angle, it was the combination of the galant and the *terribile* that gave rise to the classic-romantic musical style.

If, upon reading the final pages of Buch's book, the reader is left thrilled, pondering major issues of Western musical history, he experiences quite a different feeling while perusing the main body of the book. The author's method for proving his main point is basically enumeration. Many pages seem to be filled with lists of titles, authors, plot summaries, and descriptions of musical devices that are necessarily repetitious: the point is precisely that those elements are present in hundreds of operas and ballets. This means that reading through the book becomes rather tedious. If the author is to be thanked for the wealth of information provided, he might have made it easier on the reader by writing a more terse account of the processes

involved, highlighting the main points by centering upon a limited number of works, and gathering the rest of his useful, detailed information for hundreds of pieces in suitable appendices. Including this immense number of operas within the main narrative also means exposing oneself unnecessarily to oversights and errors. I may point out but one: Buch states that in *L'arbore di Diana* (Vienna, 1787), the composer Vicente Martín y Soler "limited musical evocations of the supernatural to the ensembles for women's voices" (p. 237). In fact, the score contains a number of occurrences of Buch's "marvelous" and "terrible" topics, specially in the second finale, which includes incantations, storms, pedal points, recitative that interrupts an ensemble, "elegant" heavenly music and so forth. Moreover, I have suggested in the foreword to the modern edition (Madrid: ICCMU, 2001, pp. xxiv–xxv) that this celebrated Italian opera is a major source for Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*. A consideration of this proposition might have given a different twist to Buch's definition of that masterpiece: "a kind of ambitious German version of recent *opéra comique* with an oriental fairy-tale text" (pp. 345–46).

Finally, given the wealth of interconnected concepts to which the author resorts, a theoretical discussion of how he understands the semantic functioning of these earmarks would have been desirable. Included here and there are brief explanations of the genre's designators: fantasy, supernatural, marvelous, magic, terrible, and so on. But the relation of these to, for example, the affect of fury or the description of a storm is not made clear, at least for the music of the earlier part of the century. Perhaps more importantly, "genre," "style," "topic" and other analogous categories are apparently used interchangeably and without a methodologically necessary clarification.

In the end, no matter what quibbles one might pose, this book is an indispensable tool for anyone who pretends to understand eighteenth-century music, and the rich insights it offers more than make up for its minor imperfections.

LEONARDO J. WAISMAN
 CONICET/ Universidad Nacional de Córdoba,
 Argentina

Tonal Space in the Music of Antonio Vivaldi. By Bella Brover-Lubovsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. [xix, 357 p. ISBN 9780253351296. \$44.95.] Music examples, illustrations, bibliography, indexes.

Musicologists who work on repertoires of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries often give their own account of pertinent principles of harmonic usage, because standard accounts may not do justice to varied practices that occur within the "tonal period" (from roughly 1690 to 1910). Yet it is tacitly acknowledged that the tonal language of, say, Corelli and the tonal language of Brahms have little in common. The tidy constructs of theorists exist more elegantly in the mind than in the messy terrain of music. Bella Brover-Lubovsky's study explores the messy terrain in a study that is both deeper and broader than its title suggests. She takes generous account of a great range of harmonic theories before, during, and after Vivaldi.

Her *Tonal Space in the Music of Antonio Vivaldi* has many strengths. It is rigorous, systematic, comprehensive, and original. It can be differentiated from studies of earlier repertoires devoted to the emergence of tonality (Lowinsky, Dahlhaus); of modal-tonal relationships (Powers, Judd); and of other Baroque repertoires (McClary, Chafe, Silbiger, Barnett). In contrast to a large body of historically oriented music theory in which one posits a precept, then shows a few pertinent examples to "prove" its validity, Brover-Lubovsky's study is based on the examination of almost all of Vivaldi's available works, currently numbered at 808. This includes substantial quantities of vocal music, some of it still unedited. In contrast to a widely held view that all of Vivaldi's music is written to one formula, she finds endless variety and nuance in his procedures. She does not force the facts to support any one view. Whatever is, is. How well Vivaldi's tonal plans fit any particular theory of eighteenth-century harmony is re-evaluated over and over again.

One of the most fascinating things about the study is its clever juxtaposition of concepts from practical theory manuals of Vivaldi's time and milieu—notably those of